

A Study of Hegelian Dialectical Embodiment in “*Nostromo*” written by Joseph Conrad

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Abstract

The present study investigates Hegel's theory of dialectic consisting of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, considering social, political and moral concerns in the well known novel written by Joseph Conrad, namely *Nostromo*. Using Dialectic theory, the famous theory of George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the German philosopher, the novel is evaluated in terms of the Dialectical features. In general, Conrad's *Nostromo novel* is investigated here since it is deeply suspected to be closely associated with Dialectic and Hegel's Dialectic theory based on which, everything is transient and finite, existing in the medium of time; everything is composed of contradictions (opposing forces); gradual changes lead to crises, turning points when one force overcomes its opponent force (quantitative change leads to qualitative change); and finally, change is helical (spiral), not circular (negation of the negation).

Keywords: Hegel, Dialectic, Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis, Relation, Negation, Sublation, Understanding and Reason

Introduction

Joseph Conrad is a well-know English novelist depicting trials of the human spirit by the demands of duty and honor in his stories and novels. Conrad was a master prose stylist who brought a distinctly non-English tragic sensibility into English literature. He is regarded as a modernist literature pioneer so that his narrative style and anti-heroic characters have influenced many authors.

Conrad set his novel, *Nostromo*, in the mining town of Sulaco, an imaginary port in the western region of the imaginary country of Costaguana. In *Nostromo*, he has more fully developed characters than any other of his novels but two characters dominate the narrative: Señor Gould and the eponymous anti-hero, the “incorruptible” *Nostromo*.

Conrad's literary career can be divided into three parts. The first period includes his Malay fiction which ends in 1896 including *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897), *The Heart of Darkness*, and *Lord Jim* (1900). The next phase starts from 1897 and extends to 1911 involving *Nostromo* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911), all three with political theme. In this period, Conrad's rich and major works were composed. The last part is the decline years which extend from 1918 to his death in 1924 entailing *Chance* (1914), *Victory* (1915), *The Shadow Line* (1917), and *The Rover* (1923).

On August 3, 1924, Conrad died of a heart attack and was buried at Canterbury, England.

Georg W.F. Hegel, the German philosopher of the early 19th century, is famous for his system of inquiry into the nature of reality which is called the dialectic. In Hegel's dialectic, each stage (or period of history) is evolved by the contradiction between opposing sides. The reason negation drives change is that it is the source of action that forces progressive improvement. In this

sense, Hegel considers that “the negative is just as much positive”, and that the “negative constitutes the genuine dialectical element. In Hegel’s dialectics, there is the thesis which is the starting society. It is negated and turned into the anti-thesis which is then negated and turned into the synthesis. Hegel’s dialectics includes “the teleological self-movement of Reason in which the posited thing (thesis) engenders its necessary limitation and negation (antithesis) overcoming through the development of a new thesis (synthesis) subsuming (overcomes while preserving) the prior moments”.

Considering Conrad’s engagement with politics and imperialism, it can be said that *Nostromo* is a logical bridge between Conrad’s earlier and later work. It narrates the realms of overseas empire, but Costaguana is post-colonial and the key players are English, French, Italian, and Spanish. Conrad’s strong tie with the revolutionary mindset is implied by Nostromo himself transformed from an ignorant servant of the capitalists into a Marxist.

The present paper attempts to analyze Conrad’s *Nostromo* under the light of the Hegelian dialectic. To this end, the following questions are investigated:

- 1- what is the concept of dialectic in Hegel’s view?
- 2-How Conrad’s *Nostromo* can be analyzed based on Hegel’s dialectic theory?

The Hegelian Dialectic is a philosophical approach explaining human beings progress toward a better condition but providing the power elite with a strategy for controlling society. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was one of the most famous philosophers of the Enlightenment Age. His thoughts were highly influenced by Plato. Such influence was reinforced by the beginning of his working life. Hegel believed that “enlightened” human beings are responsible for their own destiny, and considered culture and history as the results of human development driven by reason. Hegel confirmed the Rousseauian notion that humans are a blank slate, a tabula rasa.

According to Hegel, each stage of human advance was driven by an argument (thesis), a counterargument (anti-thesis) and finally a synthesis of the two into a more advanced argument at which, the process restarted. Hegelian dialectic could explain art, culture, history, even nature.

The Hegelian dialectic is considered as a powerful technique to influence the conversations of cultures and nations, especially if one already controls (owns) much of the important media in which the arguments take place. Accordingly, the present paper considers Hegelian dialectic *Nostromo* written by Conrad by providing a methodological extension for subsequent researches, fallen in the same category in the hope that the final consequences can be used for better understanding.

Compared with the studies done by a great number of critiques and also characters on one of Conrad’s most prominent novels, *Nostromo*, the dialectical study has been considered in the present work as the closest to Conrad’s literary taste. Conrad’s first extended venture into the political world, *Nostromo* captures a spirit of political upheaval and revolution. Conrad explores the effects of counterrevolution, national policy, political corruption, and armed insurgency on the lives of the wealthy hidalgos, the new economic imperialists, the workers and the poor. Having been a Polish nationalist in exile, and having experience of working with revolutionists and espionage agents in Switzerland and Marseilles, Conrad was familiar with the tactics and rationalizations used by political agitators and terrorists. It can be claimed that no one like Conrad could depict and criticize the dominant situation in English society. In order to broaden the scope to several new fields which have not been yet explored in the novel, the dialectical theory of the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel has been used.

Methodology and Approach

Hegel used three main concepts of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis to describe his well known philosophical approach, namely dialectic. In his theory, Hegel emphasized the paradoxical

nature of consciousness knowing that the mind wants to know the whole truth but it cannot think without drawing a distinction. But, every distinction has two terms, every argument has a counter-argument, and consciousness can only focus on one of these at a time. In other words, the dialectical method involves the notion that the form of historical movement, process or progress, is the result of conflicting opposites. Thus, this area of Hegel's thought has been broken down in terms of the categories of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Hegel's philosophy of history encompasses the concept that a conflict of opposites is a struggle between actual and potential worlds.

A thesis can be seen as a single idea. The idea contains a form of incompleteness that gives rise to the antithesis, a conflicting idea. A third point of view, a synthesis, arises from this conflict. It overcomes the conflict by reconciling the truths contained in the thesis and antithesis at a higher level. The synthesis is a new thesis. It generates a new antithesis, and the process continues until truth is arrived at.

To analyze a text based on Hegelian theory, it is needed to introduce some technical definitions in order to make a better understanding about the text.

Dialectic: the form of movement of concepts in which development takes place through opposed or contradictory stages. The development in question pertains to the subject-matter of the phenomenology, i.e. to forms of consciousness, and it is internal to them: it is self-development through self-criticism. Dialectic involves three steps: (1) one or more concepts are taken as fixed, sharply defined and distinct from one another = stage of understanding; (2) through reflection on them, a contradiction or contradictions emerge = stage of dialectical reason; (3) the result is a higher concept which embraces the earlier ones and resolves their contradiction = stage of speculative reason.

Thesis: an intellectual proposition.

Antithesis: the negation of the thesis, a reaction to the proposition.

Synthesis: the synthesis solves the conflict between the thesis and antithesis by reconciling their common truths, and forming a new proposition.

Negation: according to Hegel, dialectics has a negative character. In all these uses "negative" has a twofold reference including the negation of the fixed and static categories of common sense and the negative and untrue character of the world designated by these categories. Negativity is manifest in the process of reality so that nothing that exists is true in its given form. Every single thing has to evolve new conditions and forms if it is to fulfill its potentialities.

Relation: linking the properties of an object. For human, it is a knowledge type arising out of pure conceptual thought and logical operations. Relational theory is associated with understanding reality or a physical system in such a way that the positions and other properties of objects are only meaningful relative to other objects.

Sublation: the purification of matter by its negation or redirection. In sublation, a term or concept is both preserved and changed through its dialectical interplay with another term or concept. Sublation is the motor by which the dialectic functions.

Understanding: the intellect qua fixing, isolating, and analyzing. Hegel considers that understanding is distinct from reason but merely a stage although a necessary one.

Reason: Purposeful activity, conceptual and reflective thought the use of concepts in self-understanding; the ultimate purpose of reason is to comprehend total unity, break down false or limited distinctions, and resolve conflicts. It is opposed to understanding. As Hegel believes, the mentioned categories are not epistemological principles of knowing but ontological principles of being. Therefore, the rational is the real and the real is the rational.

An introduction to Hegel's works

The Phenomenology of Spirit (1807) was an introduction to Hegel's proposed system. This work with the epistemological, anthropological, and cultural themes is considered as the basis of the consciousness and self-consciousness development or the spirit development. Hegel seeks the mind development in relation to experience, concentrating on questions about the meaning of cognitive activities such as perceiving and knowing and also the nature of reality and reason. Hegel considers the relationship between self and otherness as the basic feature of human awareness. Hegel's ontology is based on the desire of humankind's for objects and estrangement from them which is considered as the primordial experience of the world by Hegel. He also believes that individual consciousness is prevented from finding freedom and independence in case of coping with the barrier of otherness in the external reality of the natural and social world. This otherness cannot be destroyed without the destruction of self leading to the search of reconciliation with otherness and a universalization of consciousness through the other. To indicate the problem of obtaining consciousness integration with itself through the overcoming its otherness, Hegel utilizes a dominant and subservient consciousnesses model. This dialectic is the main challenge of achieving self-recognition through mutual recognition or self-consciousness realization. The incomplete resolution of the struggle for recognition, or mutual recognition, between consciousnesses is rested in the relationship between the dominant and the obedient, or the independent and the dependent.

To follow Greek philosopher Parmenides, Hegel believes that what is rational is real, and what is real is rational. Such notion is the rational structure of the Absolute associating with the idea that the Absolute must be seen as pure Thought, Spirit, or Mind, in a process of self-development, governed by the logic of dialectic indicating the conflict of opposites creating movement or progress. The dialectical method entails three concepts of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The thesis is a primary idea highlighting an opposite or conflicting idea, or antithesis through its incompleteness. The synthesis also highlights the conflict between the first two, overcoming the opposition by adjusting the truth existing in both the thesis and antithesis. This synthesis becomes a new thesis, inspiring a new antithesis and synthesis, and continuing an evolution of intellectual or historical development. As Hegel states, dialectical development explains the movement of Absolute Spirit toward an ultimate goal. Reality is the Absolute in a process of dialectical unfolding, manifesting itself in nature and history as it develops. The manifestation of the Absolute through the stages of consciousness, self-consciousness, and reason is sought in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel is considered as the most powerful philosophers in Western philosophical and political history.

Historical Development of Criticism through Philosophy

As definition, the dialectical method is the dialogue between two or more people with different points of view about a subject tending to establish the truth of the matter through dialogue with reasoning and arguments. The difference between dialectics and debate is that the debaters feel committed for their points of view with the aim of winning the debate, either by persuading the opponent or proving the opponent's argument incorrect. There is also a distinction between Dialectics and rhetoric referring that the speaker uses various ways including logos, pathos, or ethos in order to persuade listeners to take their side of the argument.

In Hegel's logic, the dialectic is regarded highly serious. As Hegel believes, dialectic is not just a philosophical issue but it is related to the natural world as well. Hegel claims that "dialectic is in general the principal of all motion, of all life, and of all activation in the actual world" (128-9). The whole of reality is regarded as an interrelated system of mutually dependent and mutually

negating or antagonistic elements by Hegel. So, it can be said that dialectic is included in the being, and the coming-into-being, of anything.

A Dialectical Reading of *Nostromo*

The novel in brief

Nostromo is set in the South American country of Costaguana (a fictional nation, though its geography as described in the book closely matches real-life Colombia) with a long history of tyranny, revolution and warfare and a newly-experienced stable period governed by the dictator Ribiera. Charles Gould is a native Costaguanero of English descent who owns an important silver mining concession near the key port of Sulaco. The political instability makes Costaguana tired leading to his corruption, tending to consume his wealth to support Ribiera's government, hoping for stability in the country after years of misrule and tyranny by self-serving dictators. Instead, Gould's refreshed silver mine and the wealth it has created a new period of revolutions, overwhelming Costaguana into chaos. Among others, the revolutionary Montero invades Sulaco; Gould, resisting that his silver should not be wasted for his enemies, orders Nostromo, the trusted "*capataz de los cargadores*" (head longshoreman) of Sulaco, to hide it on an offshore island. Nostromo is an Italian expatriate achieving his position through his daring exploits. ("Nostromo" is Italian for "shipmate" or "boatswain", but the name could also be considered a corruption of the Italian phrase "nostrouomo", meaning "our man") Nostromo's real name is Giovanni Battista Fianza — *Fianza* meaning "trust" in archaic Italian. Nostromo is a powerful figure in Sulaco and respected by the wealthy Europeans and seemingly limitless in his abilities to command power among the local population. However, he is never accepted to become a part of upper-class society, but is instead viewed by the rich as their useful tool. He is believed by Charles Gould and his own employers to be incorruptible, and it is for this reason that Nostromo is entrusted with removing the silver from Sulaco to keep it from the revolutionaries. Nostromo's power and fame continues to grow, as he daringly rides over the mountains to summon the army which saves Sulaco's powerful leaders from the revolutionaries. In Conrad's universe, however, almost no one is incorruptible. The exploit does not help Nostromo achieve the expected fame and he feels paltriness. Feeling that his works are useless leads to his corruption and destruction since he has kept secret of the silver after all others believed it lost at sea. Mistaken for a trespasser Nostromo is shot and killed by the father of his fiancée, the keeper of the lighthouse on the island of Great Isabel, as recovering the silver for himself.

Socialism

Nostromo (or Giovanni Battista Fianza) – a charismatic Italian seaman who has settled in Sulaco and established a reputation for leadership and daring; as an employee of the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company, he earns the unofficial title of the *Capataz de Cargadores*, or "head longshoreman". Nostromo has no cause or desire for power, no ambition to become a taskmaster himself, except among the People, no idea of doing anything to change his perfect fidelity, which goes out as work and returns as trust. The crisis in this relationship comes after Nostromo is sent with Decoud on the mission to save the silver by night. After leaving Decoud and the silver on the Great Isabel, he returns to Sulaco alone and passes a day asleep at the ruined fort. Upon awakening, he experiences a gap with society and falls from innocence. So, the socialist aspect of Nostromo's character which could be regarded as the Hegelian thesis is manifested. Moving forward according to Hegel's system of dialectic, thesis (socialism) creates its opposition antithesis (capitalism). The antithesis (stage of dialectical reason) is simply the negation of the thesis, a reaction to the proposition, or a reflection on the first concept of attention to their inferiors.

Realism

Martin Decoud

Paying too much attention to the characters, Martin Decoud is another dialectical character in the company of Antonia Avellanos. Much explanation in the novel confirms Decoud as a realistic character. It is Decoud's anti-idealist realism that brings all the other characters into focus. Often, he talks with an ironic tone and a mocking voice, even about his country. Decoud believes that nothing is serious; he makes several jokes about the war preparations that offend everyone. These jokes bother many people, who take the war seriously. He had pushed the habit of universal raillery to a point where it blinded him to the genuine impulses of his own nature. He is sensible and looks upon the realities; Decoud's presence puts an ironic tone on all the war preparations. While the others treat the revolution like something special, Decoud treats it as one of many revolutions in the region, part of a never-ending cycle of violence. Decoud, as the outsider, does not bring the same feeling to the revolution. His attitude angers many because it belittles a cause that they feel is righteous.

Skepticism

Dr. Monygham

Dr. Monygham is the symbol of Skepticism. His hidden competition to gain Mrs Gould's heart involves a tragic but balanced human view of life to Charles' utopian efficiency. To speak more simply, he offers love where Charles does not. Dr. Monygham has allocated his loyalty to Mrs. Gould. He believes that she deserves any devotion. He feels an anxiety before the prosperity of the San Tome mine since its growth is bothering her peace. Having lived in a poor region till the arrival of the Goulds from Europe, the mad English doctor has been taken up by Don Carlos and Dona Emilia when it becomes apparent that for all his savage independence could be tamed by kindness. Dr. Monygham's past life proves his skeptical character. According to Hegel, the thesis negates itself and produces its negation, antithesis. In this situation, thesis and antithesis are related in an opposing way and pass into one another. To cope with such confliction, synthesis sublates them into a new concept. On the one hand, Monygham's job as a doctor and narrator's idea "the truth of his nature consisted in his capacity for passion and in the sensitiveness of his temperament" (220) indicates doctor's altruistic feature. Additionally, his position as "a personage in the administration of the Gould Concession" and "Inspector of State Hospitals, chief medical officer of the Consolidated San Tome mines" (203) or according to Captain Mitchell "A big-wig now" or even his claim "I put no spiritual value into my desires, or my opinions, or my actions" (215) can signify the fact of his materialistic aspect.

Incorruptibility, Corruption and Revolution

The Silver Mine

The silver mine and the wealth affects all the characters and drawing them on the path of political independence from Costaguana. The silver mine becomes an obsession of Mr. Gould; not to gain the influence and wealth but to achieve important thing. Such obsession with the silver mine separates Mr. Gould from his friends and family, particularly his wife. The silver mine also becomes like a romantic affair pulling him away from his wife. Silver mine also takes controls over Nostromo. He is greedy for public approval at first, but gradually destroys him and becomes an obsession for him as it was for Gould. Eventually, the secret of transferring the silver from the island causes Nostrum's death.

The existence of the treasure makes him anxious and causes him to feel so independent on it. (176.) Sotillo is also attracted deeply by silver. He can represent his own intentions for power and wealth in the region with silver. He considers the silver as the key factor of establishing his own

importance. Searching for the silver causes him to be murdered and finally drives him mad as finding the silver up and down the coast.

In the story, silver is the key element, an incorruptible metal corrupting and destroying some men and revealing the strength, weaknesses, and ruling passions of others. So, it has corruption in its incorruptibility. Considering this aspect and according to Hegelian dialectic, incorruptibility of the silver is considered as thesis, a defined and distinct concept or Hegelian understanding. So, the corruption is regarded as antithesis, a reflection on thesis or dialectical reason. And the revolution caused by thesis and antithesis and as the result of two earlier concepts is considered as the synthesis or what it is said speculative reason. According to Hegel, thesis (incorruptibility) creates antithesis (corruption) in itself as an its opposition indicating that incorruptibility has corruptibility in itself, they relate to each other and at last sublate in synthesis (revolution). Based on the aforementioned, the silver mine is the cause of the revolution, all the events and characters in the novel are connected to the silver mine, revolution has been happened for the Province is going to separate from the rest of the Republic in order to protect its commercial interests. Revolution as the synthesis has both corruptibility and incorruptibility in itself.

Conclusion

The present study investigated dialectic concept in Hegel's theory including thesis, antithesis and synthesis in the novel of *Nostromo* written by Joseph Conrad. Capitalism, socialism, materialism and altruism are considered the most important concepts in *Nostromo*. Regarding capitalism and socialism, Conrad challenged with the political concerns, events in general and characters in particular. As mentioned, Nostromo is the symbol of a socialist character. Reputation in the community is the only important thing for Nostromo and he is very proud of the area in which he is trusted by the capitalists. Such reputation is of the highest importance for him, even above all his other loyalties including loyalty to his close friends, as well as his personal interests. Using Hegel's theory, it can be said that a dialectical concept is provided by the socialistic aspect of the main character as thesis (stage of understanding), capitalistic feature of the Blancos as antithesis (stage of dialectical reason) and their resolving category, duplicity, as antithesis (stage of speculative reason).

As another dialectical process, it can be referred to Charles Gould's materialism, Emilia Gould's altruism and Dr. Monygham's skepticism as thesis, antithesis and synthesis respectively. Charles Gould has a materialistic character indicated by his deep interest to the silver mine. He thinks of nothing but the mine, leading him to neglect his wife and make poor decisions. On the contrary, his wife, Dona Emilia, has an altruistic feature devoting her time to her schools, her hospitals, and mothers with the young babies and every sick old man. Dr. Monygham's skepticism has both characteristics of Mr. and Mrs. Gould and resolves them. As a realist, Martin Decoud plays the role of a thesis or what Hegel calls stage of understanding. Decoud's anti idealist realism highlights Antonia's idealism as an antithesis or stage of dialectical reason. That is, realism is being challenged by idealism containing it as well. Thus, both categories conflict each other until a new category (love) emerges and take the control over their contradictions. It is called synthesis or stage of speculative reason Hegel's system. As the last but not the least Hegelian dialectical embodiment, the silver mine should be mentioned. Silver is the main deceiving metal in the story influencing almost all of the characters negatively in the novel. So, it has corruption in its incorruptibility. In this regards, thesis, antithesis, and synthesis are regarded as silver incorruptibility, corruption caused by it and the revolution due to it, respectively.

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